





# Grins & Giggles

## The Launch Pad to High Performance

By Maj. Norman H. Patnode

Long ago I observed that people get more things done when they're having fun. At the time, I had no idea why. Now I think I have an answer. When children play, look at the energy that's put into it, that's shared with everyone else. This sort of energy brings people together, unleashes their creativity and indeed inspires them to do amazing things. To steal a phrase from Dr. Owen Gadeken's article in ASK 7, it's their "activation energy." Amazing stuff! Dr. Gadeken highlighted the need for activation energy to propel a team to high performance. I'd like to focus your thoughts on creating this energy.

AFTER YEARS OF EXPERIENCE WITH TEAMS, I'VE COME TO recognize the absolute necessity of grins and giggles—of having fun. This is hands-down the best way to create the activation energy needed to move a team forward. I'm so convinced of this that when I join a team, if it's not safe to have fun, I work to change that. In whatever way possible, no matter how stilted or silly, it's essential to

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Once when I joined a small team of engineers who were responsible for managing tests of reentry vehicles, I found myself surrounded by people who were not having fun. They would frequently, after getting off the phone with a customer, begin to rant and rave about how stupid the customer was and how much trouble the customer was causing them because of some new funding or schedule change.

My solution? I brought a toy plastic dart gun to work. Whenever one of my teammates began to rant and rave, I grabbed my gun and shot him, over and over until he shut up. At that point the whole team was gathered around, and after we all quit laughing at the ridiculousness of the spectacle, we began to talk about the problem and what we could do about it. In a matter of weeks, the attitude of the team had shifted. We began to work together and to focus on how we could make our jobs easier by making our customers' jobs easier.

And the dart gun? Believe it or not, within a couple of weeks everyone had one, and we continued to use them as a fun way to blast the negative energy out of our team.

Fun doesn't have to be this dramatic. The key is to bring people together—so that they can share, explore and have fun. This can be done with something as simple as a lunchtime card game.

I still remember one of my earliest team experiences. Fourteen of us were doing stability and control work for high-speed military aircraft programs. Most of us were young, right out of college, which meant we were strapped for cash. We ate our sack lunches each day as we sat at our desks and reviewed reports or read technical

journals. All that changed the day that Paul, a senior engineer in our group, brought in a couple decks of cards and herded us into the new central conference space. "Bring your lunch," he said, "we're gonna have some fun." We were a little apprehensive—was this allowed?

After assuring us that we weren't breaking any rules, he said we were going to play Hearts, and he started explaining the rules. We ate, played and kept score. More importantly, we started talking to each other. Just in that first day I learned that Bill raced his car on Saturdays at the local drag strip, José had a girlfriend in Toledo and Joe was taking classes at night in hopes of getting into medical school. It was fun, and we agreed to play again the next day.

Pretty soon we were competing for bragging rights. Then one day, after Bob had won several days in a row, it happened—we ganged up on him. While it's true we "ganged up" on him, what really happened was we started working as a team. Looking back on it, I realize that as we got to know each other, it became much easier to ask those "dumb questions," and to ask the team for help when we needed it. We also got a lot better at working together, solving problems, and getting things done—all because of a silly card game.

If it hadn't been for those card games, I'm sure none of us would have made that three-hour drive to Toledo seven months later to see José and Lori get married.

Fun comes in many shapes and sizes, but one of the best ways to bring on those grins and giggles is to tell a

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good story. We all recognize how much learning can be found in a good story, but we shouldn't neglect the fun that can be squeezed out of one, as well. On one of my more recent teams, we made a point to share our stories in a fun and humorous way.

Every Friday afternoon we'd meet in the courtyard for refreshments, a much-deserved break, and the

Owen Gadeken and Maj. Norman H. Patnode met in January 2000 when Gadeken was the faculty advisor to Patnode's section in the Defense Acquisition University's (DAU) Advanced Program Management Course. "Although Norman sat in the back corner of the room, he was not shy about commenting on virtually anything that caught his interest during the course," remembers Gadeken, whose article in ASK 7, "Activation Energy," brought out the "Grins and Giggles" in Patnode. Says Gadeken: "Whenever I had a

particularly dry or even complex subject to discuss with the class, I could always rely on Norman to come up with some interesting insight on the topic." Gadeken soon discovered that Patnode also had a well-developed sense of humor, probably honed from the experiences he relates in his article. Eventually, with Gadeken's encouragement, Patnode joined the DAU faculty. "I continue to be amazed," says Gadeken, "at the insights Norman can draw from both his and others' seemingly routine project management experiences."



**MAJ. NORMAN H. PATNODE** is a Professor of Program Management & Leadership at the Defense Acquisition University, where he provides training in strategic leadership, critical thinking, teamwork and teambuilding, the application of Myers-Briggs (MBTI), program risk management, coaching and conflict management. He also teaches a number of the basic program management tools. He can be reached at [norman.patnode@dau.mil](mailto:norman.patnode@dau.mil)

presentation of what we called the "Clue Bird" award. (A "Clue Bird," an expression used by pilots in the military, is a good luck sign because it lands on one's shoulder when one needs it most.) The rules were simple. Anyone could get up and tell a story about someone on the team. Usually the story involved some "noteworthy" activity from the previous week, such as how Dan had become a hero by screwing something up in a way that caused the rest of the team to take note of an impending disaster, and avert it.

This was a big team, responsible for the Herculean task of manufacturing and delivering the Air Force's newest large cargo aircraft, so there was never a shortage of stories each week. The stories were always clean and in good taste, but since it was widely accepted that only 10% truth was required for a good story, they always brought plenty of comic relief.

After everyone had told their stories, we'd all vote by applause and the "Clue Bird" would be passed on to the winner to display proudly at their desk for the week. As we all headed back to our desks, laughing and reflecting on the stories we'd just heard, and what we'd learned from them, you could actually feel the increased energy in the team.

The thread that weaves these three examples of teams sharing grins and giggles is the very fact that they were "sharing." Shared experiences create space where team members can get to know one another, and discover how much they have in common with each other. These commonalities are the building blocks of

trusting relationships. And trust is the foundation required to build a high performance team. With a high performance team, you can accomplish anything.

As a team moves towards higher performance, its members begin to see the differences between themselves not as obstacles, but as opportunities. Exploiting these opportunities leads to more innovative ideas and increased performance. Team members learn to move past superficial differences in how they look and speak, and begin to recognize the differences in how they think, explore and even dream. They find new and creative ways to put those differences to work for the team. As a result, performance soars.

As for the team members, they'll tell you they're having the time of their life. They'll tell you what they're doing is fun, not work. Then they'll make you swear not to tell anyone. So don't. Just keep on grinning. •

#### LESSONS

- Work can and should be fun. Think about a child at play—curious, open-minded, learning and discovering. Play can stimulate a cycle of solving problems and uncovering new ones by bringing out the best in each of us.
- Regardless of your position on the team, you can create the fun and energy needed to launch your team on a path to high performance.

#### QUESTION

*If not by play, what ways do you tap the "activation energy" of a project team?*